

The Effect of Perception On Resident Assistant Job Performance

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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Abstract

Resident assistants (RAs) can experience a great deal of role strain from the different responsibilities they have in their job. One such strain is that between being a friend and an effective authoritative figure. Some of this stress can be caused by the supposed perception that RAs think residents have of them. This study focuses on what RAs' perceptions are of them and what they think the perception of them is from residents. Furthermore, this study also examines how residents actually perceive RAs and how residents want to be treated by RAs in policy-related situations. The synthesis of this research involved 38 resident assistants and 29 residents from various residence halls on Ball State's campus. This study, however, is by no means exhaustive and should only be used to further the conversation about RAs interactions and authoritative stances they take with residents as well as how those interactions impact their performance as a RA.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Methodology.....	4
Literature Review.....	6
• Authority Figures.....	6
• Resident Assistants.....	9
• Job Performance.....	11
• Resident Assistants and Role Strain.....	14
Findings.....	16
• Resident Assistant Description—RAs.....	16
• Expressing Authority—RAs.....	19
• Resident Perception of Resident Assistants—RAs.....	27
• Impact on Job Performance—RAs.....	30
• Resident Assistant Description—Residents.....	33
• How Resident Assistants Express Authority—Residents.....	35
• How You Want Authority Expressed—Residents.....	39
Discussion and Implications for Practice.....	44
Limitations.....	47
Future Research.....	48
Conclusion.....	48
References.....	50
Interview Questions.....	53
Appendix A—Resident Assistant Transcriptions.....	54
Appendix B—Resident Transcriptions.....	87
Appendix C—IRB and CITI Certifications.....	108

The Effect of Perception On Resident Assistant Job Performance

Introduction

Resident assistants (RAs) are student leaders working and living with other college students in university residence halls. RAs are the employees who, out of all the authorities on campus, spend the most time with university residents. RAs act as counselors, enforcers of policies, and role models for their residents (Masson, 2000). As authoritative figures RAs can experience role strain from the different responsibilities they have (Powers, 2003) as well as carry some of the burdens that come along with being an authoritative figure. Some of these burdens are peoples' perceptions of them and having to express their authority in a way that does not turn people against them. These burdens and role strains, along with certain personality traits that accompany authoritative figures, can impact job performance.

This study investigates the perceptions that RAs at Ball State University have of themselves as well as what they think residents' perceptions of them are. Actual residents' perceptions of RAs were also investigated.. While this study is limited in scope, the results can be used to help resident assistants and hall directors at Ball State, as well as other similar institutions. This study can also be used as a conversation starter between RAs and hall directors or RAs and residents to gain a better understanding of the RA role.

Methodology

This study focused on the perceptions of resident assistants through self-reflections of both resident assistants and residents at Ball State University. This was accomplished by interviewing RAs and residents at various residence halls

across the Ball State University campus. Recruitment for RAs occurred via email sent by Residence Hall Director and Thesis Advisor, Charles Cherry. The email was then followed up by personal visits to residence hall staff meetings for those halls willing to participate. Individuals who participated in the interview also helped recruit more RAs from their hall. RAs who participated had to have been a RA for at least one full semester to qualify for this study.

The interviewed residents were recruited by the interview team first receiving permission to enter their hall from their residence hall director. The interview team then sat in the common space of the residents' hall and asked them if they would like to participate. Residents interviewed had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 to participate.

Several measures were taken to ensure anonymity of interview participants. Audio recordings of the interview were digitally saved in a password-protected folder until transcribed to prevent risk of voice recognition. Interviews were recorded using pseudonyms for the participants and other people whose identity may have made the informant identifiable. To also protect the informants from any discomfort they might have felt in the process of the interview, they were provided with resources available to them as Ball State students such as the Counseling Center. Participants were interviewed in their residence hall in a private area to ensure that only the interviewers heard the information given.

The interview team consisted of the co-primary investigators but participants could request to be interviewed by only one person if it would help them feel comfortable. This was particularly the case when interviewing residents

about RAs since Taylor Thurlow (co-investigator) was still an active RA at Ball State. Interviews lasted between one to five minutes and consisted of four questions for RAs and three questions for residents. Participants could choose not to answer any question without explanation. When composing the questions, the interview team attempted to make open-ended questions with as little suggestive wording as possible so that the participants could discuss the topics as they interpreted it. The questions for RAs centered on the perceptions they had of the role of RAs as well as the perceptions they thought residents had of RAs. RAs were also asked a question regarding the impact of resident perception on their job performance. Resident questions focused on the perception they had of RAs as well as how they would like to be confronted by RAs as authoritative figures.

In the data analysis process, interview transcriptions were analyzed by question using grounded theory method. Rather than working forward from a hypothesis, this method's first step is data collection followed by marking key points via series of codes. These codes were then grouped and arranged into relevant categories or themes. This method also is called a reverse engineered hypothesis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Literature Review

Authority Figures

Authority figures are parents, bosses, law enforcement and teachers just to name a few. The first authority figures that a child comes in contact with are his parents. From then on, the child's perceptions of his parents as authority figures are often times used as a generalization for other figures in authority (Ferguson &

Kennelly, 1974). A generalized expectancy construct proposed by Rotter (1966) called Internal-External Locus of Control is useful in predicting human behavior, such as people's responses to authority. In the expectancy construct, a person who exhibits an internal locus of control is described as having developed a strong tendency to perceive cause and effect relationships between their behavior and contingent reinforcements. Conversely, a person who exhibits an external locus of control is described as perceiving reinforcements as following, but not as contingent upon their behavior. Moreover, external people attribute reinforcements to luck or chance. In applying these characteristics to how internals and externals view authority, internals tend to see authority figures in a more positive light than externals due to their reinforcement-seeking activities (Ferguson & Kennelly, 1974).

In a study done by Katkovsky, Crandall and Good (1967), parental behavior and attitudes associated with their children's internal or external orientations were studied. They found that parents of internal children tend to be more positive reinforcers while parents of external children were more negative reinforcers. In college-aged people, it was found that internals perceive their parents as more predictable than externals and that externals perceived their parents as more inconsistent and lax in disciplinary practices (MacDonald, 1971). This suggests that individuals with a more internal orientation often see authority figures as more encouraging and constructive, whereas individuals with a more external orientation tend to perceive authority figures as restricting. Furthermore, internals typically see authority figures as sources of support and externals typically see authority figures as sources of criticism and rejection. An example would be that an internal

would be more likely to seek help from a teacher when experiencing difficulty in a class whereas an external would not for fear of rejection and criticism (Ferguson & Kennelly, 1974).

There are other ways to perceive authority figures, regardless of an internal or external disposition, upon which legitimacy must be taken into account. Studies conducted by Tyler (1992 & 2006) show that perception of authorities as legitimate help lead people to voluntarily accept and obey rules from these authorities. A way that someone justifies a system (such as a boss to employee relationship at work) is they legitimize the authority figure in their mind by seeing that person in power as deserving of that position (van der Toorn et. al, 2011).

French and Raven (1959) observed “legitimate power is the power which stems from internalized values...which dictate that [an authority] has a legitimate right to influence [a person] and that [the person] has an obligation to accept this influence” (p. 159). If a person cannot see the authority figure as a legitimate person of power deserving of that title, then little respect is in place and the authoritative figure has trouble getting that person to follow rules. In a college setting, students who felt that authorities had more power rated those authorities as more legitimate. Power, however, is not an attribute but rather a structural property of social relations that derives from the authority’s relative degree of control over outcomes. Power is assigned to people due to a system. Authority figures can be seen as more legitimate as well when they are depended upon. For example, a person in trouble with the law should view the law enforcer as more legitimate as his fate depends on

the authority. Legitimacy is tied to outcome dependence (van der Toorn et al, 2011).

Perception can greatly influence reality. A popular theme in modern social psychology is that human beings have the power to construct their own social realities (Jussim, 1991). In social psychology there are two social constructivist perspectives: strong and weak (Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). Strong social constructivist perspective emphasizes the inaccuracy of social beliefs whereas the weak social constructivist perspective acknowledges that people's errors and prejudices sometimes create a social reality (Brophy, 1983). Jussim (1991) concludes that there is not much support for the strong perspective but instead people often most frequently use the weak perspective.

How authority figures view themselves can affect how an organization is run. The way leaders behave and how they perceive their own behavior often becomes the source of interpersonal misunderstanding among people in a workplace, much like the weak social constructivist perspective demonstrates. A study was conducted among residence life staff members and it was found that several leaders who viewed themselves as low in consideration and high in initiating structure (parameters set by the study) were viewed oppositely by subordinates (Moy & Hales, 1973). This demonstrated that individuals may view authority figures differently than authority figures view themselves.

Resident Assistants

Resident Assistants (RAs) are student leaders working and living with other college students in university residence halls. RAs are the employees who, out of all

the authorities on campus, spend the most time with university residents. RAs act as counselors, enforcers of policies, and role models. All of these roles show that RAs are typically highly active and serve as visible leaders as well as participate in considerable social interaction (Masson & Deluga, 2000). RAs are the catalysts that create an environment for students that is conducive to academic, personal, and social growth. They are a resource to their community (Masson & Deluga, 2000; Powers, 2003).

At Ball State University, RAs are expected to adhere to and foster three statements that serve as expectations that Ball State Housing and Residence Life has created: mission statement, diversity statement and sustainability statement (BSU, 2013-2014)

Mission Statement

We support the academic success and personal growth of our students through safe, comfortable, affordable and diverse living and learning communities.

Diversity Statement

The Office of Housing and Residence Life is committed to valuing and learning from the diversity of students on our campus. We embrace all of the people who complete our campus community and pledge to challenge and support our students in overcoming barriers of prejudice and discrimination in an increasingly global society.

Sustainability Statement

Housing and Residence Life fosters a culture of environmental sustainability and civic responsibility by educating individuals about their impact on the campus, local and global communities. We seek to initiate action and awareness to create healthy social systems and environments (p. 5).

Each statement focuses on the RAs being a resource and a source of guidance for residents rather than authority. However, RAs at Ball State are still expected and required to fulfill authoritative responsibilities.

As an authority figure, RAs at Ball State University have to not only deal with conduct issues but also must hold and attend meetings, complete duty rounds, know and lead emergency safety protocol and routines, and ensure that a comfortable and safe environment is in place for their community. As authoritative figures, RAs are expected to be consistent and treat everyone with the same amount of respect. Administrative tasks (incident reports, paperwork, etc.) are expected to be completed professionally and confidentially as well (BSU, 2013-2014).

Most of the Ball State University Resident Assistant Handbook, however, focuses on non-authoritative roles. The RA position is described as a “selfless position” (BSU, 2013-2014, p.19) and due to that, staff members are asked to make multiple and significant sacrifices in order to serve the residents. RAs are also expected to maintain a positive attitude at all times when representing themselves and the university in public functions. For RAs, this is most of the time they spend on or near campus. RAs are also expected to make their availability to their residents a priority, thus there are multiple requirements they must oblige regarding their time spent in and out of the residence hall.

In terms of community building, RAs are required to be the catalyst for community development on their floor and hall. This means that RAs are also responsible for creating a warm, welcoming, and safe environment for their residents. Upon doing so, RAs must know every resident on the floor in a personal way. Community building is done by a RA through one-on-one interactions or floor programming (BSU, 2013-2014).

Job Performance

The way employees perceive their work can influence the efficiency and profitability of a company or organization ("Employee work perception," 2010). If employees feel like they are uncomfortable, strained, or displeased, then the quality of their work may be compromised. Additionally, personality traits can attribute to job performance. Decades of field personality theory research has led to a broad agreement that concerns the structural organization of traits in terms of five domains: agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion and neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Goldberg, 1990; Norman, 1963). These five domains are often called the "Big-Five" or the Five Factor model (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Meta-analyses that use the Five Factor model to assess job performance have found that conscientiousness and emotional stability (lack of neuroticism) are positively correlated with overall job performance in virtually all jobs (Barrick et al, 2001).

The other three factors do come into play as predictors of job performance but tend to be more for certain occupational groups. For instance, agreeableness is useful in predicting a teamwork-related job and extraversion has a positive relationship with job performance for manager-related jobs or jobs that have an interpersonal component, such as the RA job (Wu & Stemler, 2008). In addition to extraversion being a predictor of RA job performance, conscientiousness (as previously mentioned for all jobs) is a factor. Conscientious people are hardworking, self-disciplined and take a deliberate approach to organizing, planning and completing tasks. However, in Masson and Deluga's study (2000), conscientiousness was not always a positive correlation to RA job performance. It

was found that some of the traits that make someone conscientious also made him rigid and therefore not effective in communicating with students. The effective RA, from the residents' perspective, was determined by a flexible response rather than rigorously enforcing the nuances of the policy

Positive affect, which is not a "Big-Five" factor can also be a component of job performance. Affect refers to an individual's mood or feelings. People high in positive affect have an overall sense of well being and experience more favorable emotions. Positive affect has been linked to extraversion as it is also related to social boldness and interaction. For a RA specifically, positive affect is positively correlated to job efficacy and overall performance (Masson & Deluga, 2000).

In addition to personality, emotional intelligence is also a factor in job performance (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions (Salovey & Mayer, 1989)." Emotional intelligence includes five domains itself: intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. With the multitude of responsibilities that RAs possess, it is likely that effective RAs have high levels of EI. If a certain domain of EI is low, stress management for example, then job performance could drop. EI can be applied to virtually all jobs as well, varying on the type of occupation examined (Wu & Stemler, 2008).

Resident Assistants and Role Strain

RAs serve many roles on campus. Being an authority figure is just one of the roles that a RA plays. With so many different roles needing to be filled, RAs can tend to feel role strain. Role strain can be thought of as feeling difficulty in meeting role demands (Moen & McClain, 1987). Role strain can happen in any job but seems to be particularly present in the job of a resident assistant. Powers (2003) would propose that the RA job is too much for a 19-23 year old to handle because of all the added pressures and spontaneity that comes with it. It is a common saying at Ball State University that as a RA you are a person first, student second, and resident assistant third. Nevertheless a RA is still all three of those roles at the same time, each having numerous subcategories.

In past studies, it has been found that women report greater stress levels than men (Erdwins et al, 2001). Furthermore, research on role strain of parents resulted in women having more feelings of role strain than men (Greenberger & O'Neil, 1993). The RA position often feels like a parenting role. RAs try to help the resident grow and learn about himself while also correcting his behavior when it does not adhere to the Housing and Residence Life policies. Female resident assistants typically show a higher sense of role strain than do men, which Powers (2003) proposed was because of the parental nature of the job. Self-confidence and support from a supervisor resulted in women feeling less role strain (Erdwins et al, 2001).

A particular aspect of role strain that is evident in the RA job is that RAs are expected to reprimand residents when they do something against hall policy while at the same time still trying to retain a type of friendship with the resident. Since

RAs serve as administrators for the hall, there is a boundary created that some residents (and RAs) are unwilling to cross to make a friendly connection (Powers, 2003). RAs tend to struggle with balancing developing personal relationships and confronting policy violations. Sometimes this struggle stems from a want to be accepted by residents. This acceptance can be altered when policy enforcement is introduced and this altering can change the bond of their community. This role ambiguity can create a hard environment for the RA to work in and foster their community.

Other strains that a RA might feel in addition to the job itself come from their roles as a student and an individual. Financial concerns, social events, and grades are just a few of the other things RAs have to balance. RA training is supposed to help RAs learn how to balance their lives as well as properly fulfill their duties. However, most trainings only last one week, leaving many RAs wondering about many situations they might encounter as well as how balancing their life will actually look (Elleven et al, 2001). Sometimes this produces fear in RAs and they do not feel they have enough training to help them combat the strain that comes along with the many roles they fulfill (Powers, 2003).

Resident assistants can also go through social isolation from their peers. Many people who are not in the RA role do not fully understand the demands that are placed on a RA and therefore usually cannot fully relate to a RA. Along with sometimes not being fully understood, RAs are not always seen as peers. Many students view RAs as people they can approach with problems but not someone they would ask to go hang out with. Both of these situations can cause social

isolation for RAs, often pushing them to form friendships and bonds with other RAs who better understand their situation (Powers, 2003).

Powers (2003) concluded that if RAs felt that regulating behavior was part of the job description, then their role strain and social isolation increased. Similarly, if the RA felt the job was difficult and they regretted taking the position they felt more strain. This suggests that RA performance levels begin to decrease with the added pressures of the job.

Findings

In resident assistant interviews RAs were asked four questions that included what they thought described RAs, how they expressed authority as a RA, what they think residents think of RAs, and if that perception by residents affects how they act in their job. In resident interviews residents were asked to describe RAs, describe how RAs act as authoritative figures, and explain how they would like a RA to express authority if they (the residents) were in trouble. Each question was open-ended with exception of the fourth question for RAs. However, every RA participant further elaborated on that question. Within all of the questions common themes emerged based off of the responses.

Resident Assistant Description—RAs

Each RA was asked to provide three adjectives, nouns or descriptors that they thought best described a resident assistant. There was a wide array of responses but a few common themes emerged as the data was analyzed. The themes describing RAs were: calm and mature, compassionate and counselor, role model and leader, policy enforcer, dedicated and hardworking, time constricted,

social and campus representative. Each theme served as an umbrella under which several descriptors were present.

Calm and Mature

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like calm, collective, levelheaded, mature, responsible, and well rounded. These descriptors were used by 26.32% of RAs interviewed and made up 11.40% of total responses (out of 114). About half of the respondents who used one of these words also used another one as an additional descriptor. Additionally, RAs who used a descriptor in this theme also tended to use a descriptor in the compassionate and counselor theme.

Compassionate and Counselor

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like caring, compassionate, counselor, empathetic, mediator, open-minded, reliable, sympathetic, trustworthy, thoughtful and understanding. These descriptors were used by 39.47% of RAs interviewed and covered 18.42% of total responses. Over half of the RAs who used a descriptor in this theme used at least one more in the same theme. Aside from the calm and mature theme, these responses were often coupled with the role model and leader theme responses.

Role Model and Leader

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like confident, courageous, go-getter, role model, inspirational, leader, leadership, omnipresent, powerful, strong and strong-willed. These descriptors were used by 36.84% of the

RAs interviewed and comprised 16.67% of total responses. Again, several RAs who used one of these descriptors were likely to use another in their choice of three.

Policy Enforcer

Descriptors that were placed under this category were terms like policy enforcement and to the point. This theme had the least number of responses as only 7.89% of RAs interviewed chose a descriptor like this. These descriptors also only made up 2.63% of the total responses.

Dedicated and Hardworking

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like attentive, dedicated, determined, desire, devoted, hardworking, involved, motivated and organized. This theme had the largest percent of RAs use these descriptors which was 42.11%. These descriptors contributed to 18.42% of total descriptor responses. These descriptors once used were often used again in a RA response. In addition, a common theme seen with these descriptors was the social theme.

Social

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like charismatic, creative, excited, friend, fun, outgoing, passionate, social and unique. These descriptors came from 31.58% of RAs interviewed and 14.91% of total descriptor responses. Again, descriptors like these were often used together with one respondent, Rose, using fun, friendly, outgoing and social as her total answer.

Time Constricted

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like busy, flexible and time management. 23.68% of RAs used descriptors in this theme and

these descriptors comprised 8.77% of total responses. For as few of descriptors that fell under this theme, the percentages were large in comparison. Only one RA respondent, Lydia, used two descriptors in this theme in her response. Mostly, these descriptors were used along with the dedicated and hardworking theme descriptors.

Campus Representative

Descriptors that were placed under this category were words like campus representative, helpful, inclusive, information disseminator, resourceful, unbiased and underpaid. This theme represented 18.42% of the RAs interviewed and 7.89% of the total descriptor responses. One RA, Declan, used all three of his descriptors from this theme when he described a RA as a resource, information disseminator and campus representative.

Expressing Authority—RAs

Each RA was asked to describe how they personally expressed authority as a resident assistant. Responses varied but some commonalities were observed when the data was analyzed. Certain phrases and descriptors were picked up on in interviews and the responses were classified into seven types of responses: Attitude and behavior, setting boundaries, laidback and nice, straightforward or strict, informative, respectful and leading by example. Each of these themes housed several descriptors and phrases that were recorded. It must be noted that many RAs' responses fit into more than one category. For instance, if someone answered with a descriptor that fell under setting boundaries, they might have also answered with another descriptor that fell under informative.

Attitude and Behavior

Body language and tone can be a very effective tool in reaching a point or conveying a message to someone. Upon analyzing and categorizing responses this theme had the following phrases and descriptors: attitude, behavior, expression, give a look, and tone of voice. These kinds of responses comprised 26.32% of RAs interviewed. It was found that RAs who answered with these types of descriptors generally used other descriptors in the same theme and did not tend to use other types.

One RA, Leah, spoke about how her tone and behavior changes when she has to be authoritative. She said:

Usually I put on more of a stern tone because usually I laugh a lot. But when I have to show my authority, I am very stern and business-like. So I am not really cracking jokes like I usually do and people know I am not behaving in my natural state, and that kind of pushes that authoritarian persona.

Another RA, Chris, answered similarly by stating:

For me, I am a quiet person so whenever my voice is deep or my facial expressions change with certain residents they know I am upset and I am not usually like that. They know they need to stop that or they get a warning.

Changing tone and behavior when having to express authority seems to be the key for several RAs. It allows the RAs to still maintain a good working relationship with their residents but have a sure way to let their residents know when they mean business and are not the laidback friend anymore. RA Beth went on to say, "Making those behavioral changes has worked really well for me in the past and I haven't had any issues when I made that line."

Setting Boundaries

With RAs being both a student and an authoritative figure it is often encouraged by hall directors that RAs set some sort of boundaries in their relationships with their residents. Several RA respondents said that in setting these boundaries it helps them express their authority when needed. In these responses, phrases and descriptors used were set boundaries, doing my job, forceful early, follow through, and draw a line. These responses accounted for 31.58% of RA respondents. RAs who used a descriptor in this theme were very likely to also use a descriptor in the laidback and nice theme. Only three out of the eleven responders in this theme did not choose a descriptor in the laidback and nice theme as well.

RA Gloria, when asked about how she expresses authority, had several responses, one of which was drawing a line. She said:

I try to take a friendlier role with my residents but I make sure they know there is a line and they know that if they do anything against the rules they are going to be documented. Just as I would anyone that I am not as close to on the floor.

Several RAs, such as Rose, said that the way they set up a boundary is, “being strict at the beginning of the year and then easing up as time progresses.” Richard said, “You have to be forceful at the beginning because if you aren’t forceful then, and have to do it again, then they are just going to walk all over you.” Many of the RAs who responded this way also responded that they tried to have a friendly approach with their residents but make sure their residents know that their job comes first. Sophia said she tries to explain to her residents, “This is my job and please respect me because I am going to put my job before you.” Similarly Tom said:

I express my authority by letting them know I am a student first and in the same place. That way there isn’t much hostility towards me when correcting them. That way when having to handle something it

is more of “I have to do this” and making sure that we are on the same page instead of “I am doing this to be mad at you.”

Bella continued this type of boundary setting saying she expresses authority by:

Making sure that in the beginning I let them know that yes, I am here for you but this is my job so I will be your friend but this is my job first. So kind of establishing those boundaries in the beginning so they know what I expect of them and what they can expect of me.

Boundaries serve as a way for many RAs to still maintain a friendly approach while at the same time letting the resident always know there is a line that cannot be crossed.

Laidback and Nice

This theme had the greatest diversity when it came to other themes that were coupled with it. It seems that most RAs value being nice and having some sort of laidback approach along with whatever other authoritative style they have. In these responses, phrases and descriptors used were calm, don't snoop around, have an even playing field, friendly, laidback, nice, non-domineering, have an open relationship, passive, present in the halls, relatable, relaxed, understanding, and give warnings. This theme accounted for 44.74% of RA respondents, which was tied for the most along with the theme straightforward or strict. This theme did have the greatest number of responses however, which was 22 out of a total 89. Only 6 RAs who used descriptors like these also used descriptors from the straightforward or strict theme.

Oftentimes RAs feel when they are laid back they can continue to have a good relationship with their residents even when they do have to get more authoritative. Joe said:

I am more laid back about it because I realize, especially with a mainly freshmen population on my floor, that they are going to make mistakes, especially initially. So I don't want them to think that my only goal is to get on them or jump on them for being in trouble. Initially I am pretty lax but once I give one warning it kind of ramps up from there.

When Joann has a situation, she sees it as a betrayal of trust because she has a friendlier approach. She commented:

Around here I consider it more friendship-based so when they break my trust then that hurts me. They don't necessarily see me as an authoritative figure, but they see me as a friend they don't want to betray. I see it like that.

As stated previously, however, many RAs take a friendly approach along with other approaches. Some RAs have no problem switching from friend to strict enforcer (or informer) when necessary. Declan said:

In terms of authority, I try to be as subtle a leader as I can in terms of what I have to do. If I have to be authoritative with policy enforcement, or any other time of leadership, normally I get pretty stern. Otherwise it is passive leadership.

Similarly, Gloria said that she, "will take a joking way to communicate some things, but all of my residents generally know me pretty well enough to know when I mean business."

Straightforward or Strict

Most RAs typically do not want to have to dictate to people all day or constantly enforce rules. However, some RAs find it is easiest to express authority in clear, authoritative ways that fit this theme. In these types of responses, phrases and descriptors used were authoritative, enforcer, firm, formal, keep residents in line, no nonsense, serious, stand my ground, step in when needed, straightforward, strict, to the point and upfront. These types of responses accounted for 44.74% of

RAs interviewed, which was tied for the highest number of responses category along with laidback and nice.

John was very adamant about having a straightforward authoritative stance.

He commented:

I am very stern and direct. I tend not to go around the bush with the question. If there is a situation then I am going directly for the gun to take whatever is going on and finish it out as quickly as possible. No nonsense is my policy.

Clarence also commented that he does not “beat around the bush” when it comes to expressing authority, and Sally said, “I express my authority very professionally and straight to the point.” Other RAs viewed enforcing policies as a manner that should be clear-cut and no-nonsense as John stated. Lacy handles her authoritative position by being upfront. She said:

I am very upfront about it. I tell them basically this is what it is. This is what I go for and this is what I don’t go for. It is out there and clear-cut, and there should be no second-guessing it because it is the first thing that is stated when I introduce myself.

Informative

In order for RAs to enforce policies, they need to know them too. Informing residents what they are breaking policy and perhaps going further of informing them how to correct those offenses can be an effective way to express authority for RAs. In these types of responses, phrases and descriptors used were announcing authority, informative, and inform residents of rules. 23.68% of RAs responded with a descriptor in this category. However, the action of informing had the most number of responses in that seven RAs out of the 38 chose to use that means of expressing authority.

Dwight found that he could be straightforward and informative to best achieve authority. He said:

I clearly state what policy has been broken, and by doing so, I disarm any argument the resident may have by stating, "You were wrong, this is why you were in the wrong." And that is generally the end of it.

Jamie has a similar approach with her residents. She stated:

I normally make sure that the residents that I am supervising have a good understanding about the rules so that I don't have to be too aggressive. However, should some break those rules, I make sure I tell them what they did wrong, how they can go about fixing it or changing it, and then tell them the consequences of their action.

Informing residents can be a great way to establish authority informally and make a situation less about a problem between the RA and resident.

Respectful

Establishing a respectful relationship can often ease tension in potential high-stress situations. Responses that fit this theme used phrases and descriptors such as making bonds, building respect, earning respect, establishing a good rapport, respect, and being respectful. These responses comprised 18.42% of RA respondents, and all but one RA respondent used these types of descriptors along with descriptors from the laidback and nice theme. Many RAs who took a laidback approach felt they could do so because of the respect and good rapport they had built up with their residents. Dorothy's views lined up with many other RAs views when she stated her authoritative position as:

I try to be relatable to my residents so they understand where I am coming from and the reason I am exerting my authority in a certain situation. They know why I am acting the way I am. I am definitely pretty relaxed as much as possible and I think my residents respect that and know that I have to do what I have to do in my job. I have never really had a problem with people questioning my authority or

disrespecting me because I have a good respectful relationship with my residents as well as being chill and cool with them.

Many RAs, like Karen, have the idea, “If you respect me then I will respect you.” This philosophy, like Dorothy stated, has worked for them as a RA and they have not seemed to have many problems when approaching residents like this.

Bruce agreed saying:

I think a lot of it is getting the residents to respect you and form that bond. And if they are friendly with you, then they won’t disrespect you and break the rules. It’s like disappointment versus anger.

Leading By Example

It is hard to respect and want to follow the command of someone who does not hold themselves to the same standards you are being held to. This is the same in the RA-resident relationship. RAs who had responses in this theme feel to be an authoritative figure you need to be a good role model. This theme had responses that used phrases and descriptors like be an example, be a leader, role model, and follow the rules. However, this theme accounted for the least number of RA respondents at only 13.16% of total interviewees.

Karen felt like leading by example was a way to not only earn respect but also show her authority as a leader. She said:

I lead by example because I feel that my residents will see me. It is kind of like the fishbowl effect. My residents see me in the hall and outside the hall so not breaking policies in another hall is important too.

Donna also felt similarly when she said, “I express authority in my job by being a role model, following the rules, and being a good example for residents.”

Resident Perception of Resident Assistants—RAs

Each RA was asked to describe how they thought residents perceived resident assistants. Responses varied but some commonalities were observed. Phrases and descriptors were categorized from the transcription, and the responses were classified into themes. The themes were positive, police officer, mean, powerful and parental. Only one theme used positive descriptors. Though some RAs responded using both positive and negative descriptors, the majority (82.28%) of responses were negative descriptors.

Positive Perception

Descriptors that fell into this theme were words like positive, appreciated, friend, good, and respected. 34.21% of RAs interviewed used a descriptor in this theme, but not one RA respondent used only descriptors from this theme. Always a positive perception descriptor was coupled with another negative category. Some RAs used positive perception descriptors because they thought that residents' perceptions of RAs were situational. Carol said:

I think it depends on the situation and the person based on previous experience. If a resident has had a good experience with their RA, and tend not to get in trouble, then they are going to look at their RA as more of a friend or someone who is just there. But if they are more of a person who gets caught, or is not necessarily always following the rules, they are going to look to the RAs to blame them for the reason why they are getting in trouble. Therefore they are going to have a negative position. It depends on both the person and situation.

Other RAs said that residents have to “warm up to us” before a positive perception is achieved. Joe said, “I think initially, there is a stigma with the RA position. Once they get to know us and realize everything that is going on, they tend to think ‘Oh

they aren't just after us.'" Likewise, Joann said she does not think residents have completely negative perceptions of RAs, however, it can be that way. She said, "I think it is 'We understand. We know you are doing your job' from residents."

Police Officer Perception

Descriptors that fell into this theme were cop, looking for trouble, nark, out to get, police, snitch, spy and policy enforcers. This theme had the largest number of RAs interviewed represented at 57.89%. Almost half of the RAs who responded using one of these descriptors had no additional descriptors for how RAs are perceived by residents. Also, over a third of RA respondents in this category used other descriptors from the mean perception theme to finish their thoughts on how residents perceive them.

A few examples of how RAs describe the police officer perception come from Declan and Bella. Declan said:

I think a lot of people have a misconception that the RAs role is number one policy enforcer. Which, in my opinion, is not true. I think it is more of a resource and being there when your residents need it. So I think there is a general misconception there when it comes to being a policy enforcer and being too stern.

Bella continued this idea of being a cop, but not personally feeling that way when she said:

I have just found out throughout our building that residents think we are spies and wait outside their doors and want to document them. I just think that is very funny because I don't want to write a documentation. So residents perceive us as looking to get them in trouble and that's what I want to do. Instead I am here as a resource and want to help them out instead of getting them in trouble.

Most RA responses when it came to this theme were quick, and usually the police officer descriptors were followed by reasons why most RAs do not see themselves this way much like Declan and Bella.

Mean Perception

Descriptors in this theme were words like bossy, mean, negative, no fun, rude, ruin things, scary and strict. This theme accounted for the next highest number of RA respondents at 55.26% of RAs interviewed. Much like the police officer perception, the mean perception responses were often followed by an opposing idea how RAs viewed themselves. Some RAs, like Dwight, simply state, "I think the general perception is that the RAs are police or the boss." Bella described the perception of RAs as "rude" and Amy said the perception is, "Mean, rude and not wanting to have any fun."

Powerful Perception

This theme housed descriptors and phrases describing RAs as above people, power hungry, powerful and superior. 15.79% of RAs interviewed use a descriptor in this theme. Gloria said, "I think generally residents see RAs as above them quite a bit...RAs are someone who is on their level but at the same time a bit higher." Greg furthered this superiority idea by stating:

When I was a resident I viewed my RA as someone powerful and to be scared of. But I try to do a different approach and be friendly. Like a friend who has just a little bit more power but is looking over them.

Berta recalled what she had heard people say to her in the past about RAs saying, "I think from what I have heard in the past, the general perception of the authority

aspect of RAs is that they are mean or that they enforce stupid rules and let the power go to their head.”

Parental Perception

Descriptors in this theme were words like mom or parent. This theme represented the smallest number RAs at 10.53%. The four RAs that responded using these descriptors simply said that RAs can be seen as floor moms or dads and often are viewed as substitute parents. Lacy put the residents’ perception as “Pretty much we are here trying to be your parent for college.”

Impact On Job Performance—RAs

The last question RAs were asked in their interview was, “Does the general perception you just described impact how you act in your job?” 29 out of the 38 RAs interviewed (76.32%) answered, “yes” to that question. Out of those who answered, “yes” there arose three categories of reasons why resident perceptions affect their job. The categories were: Wanting to change the stereotype/perception, the effect is situational, and wanting to avoid being hated/wanting to be liked.

Change The Perception

Change the perception was the most prevalent reason stated by the RAs who responded that the perception from residents affected them. 41.4% of RAs interviewed suggested because of what they think residents think of them, they want to act the opposite to break the stereotype. John’s response talked about breaking that perception early. He said:

I think being in a freshmen dorm, it is important that we break that perception before they actually get to witness us and what we do...Where we come in with our own one-on-one personal stories is

where they have something they can use and say, "You know, I did hear that about RAs, but my RA isn't like that."

Richard furthered this idea stating, "I am aware that people feel that way so I try to change the stereotypes. I am very friendly with my residents." and Sally was very adamant that it did indeed affect her saying, "Oh for sure! I always think I need to overcompensate so that people realize I am human but still doing my job."

Dorothy said that she tries to defeat the stereotype by her actions to her residents especially if they have had a bad experience with a RA before.

I would say it affects my job performance because my residents will tell me, "My RA last year always tried to get me in trouble." And I will just say, "Well that's not what I am here for." I always try to defeat the stereotype through my actions. I think this is the only way it affects me...not wanting to be the big, mean, bad RA.

By trying to disprove the stereotype, it can encourage some RAs to express some of their less authoritative qualities when approaching residents. Leah said, "I think it encourages me to show more of my non-authoritarian side just to show them that the RA isn't only the police officer, but we are there for other things too."

Situational Effect

A handful of RAs who answered "yes" did so, but it was situational. One situation described by Rose is when a resident thinks you are out to get them. Rose said:

I think sometimes it does. More specifically because I had an incident where someone kept saying, "You're out to get me" and I actually wasn't. It makes it to where if you are going to do something wrong, I kind of want to bust you more than other people just because you are accusing me of being out to get you when I am really not.

In this case, Rose was not trying to break the stereotype but actually wanted to live up to it because of her frustration. She did not feel that a police officer was who she really was, but being called that repeatedly made her want to be that way.

In a different situational light, some RAs said it depended on the floor they were located. Joe said, “You take on the role that the floor demands.” And Clare broadened with this idea when she said:

I think it definitely does change it, but I think it changes per floor. With my floor I am a lot more casual because I see them on a daily basis so I don't try to assert my authority too often because I want them to have a good relationship with me. But on other floors, I am more likely to assert my authority because they aren't necessarily my direct residents.

When floors and different areas of the building are concerned, it seems to be even whether a RA will live up to the stereotype or try to break it.

Avoid Hatred

Some RAs want to be liked and certainly find it easier to run a floor when people view them as personable and not the “mean RA” stereotype. Karen said the first year she was a RA she “was nervous to document someone or be authoritative to someone because I didn't want the resident to hate me.” Donna also wanted people to like her, which made her “strive harder for that personal one-on-one relationship. I wanted to people to know I am not a monster but I am a person you can talk to about anything.”

Clarence made a point that, “No one wants to be hated” which may be true, but 23.68% of RAs who were interviewed said that the general perception did not affect them and they did not care what residents thought previously. Many RAs who answered, “no” said the perception of them did not matter because they were going

to do their job regardless. Carol said, “I think you should be consistent with everyone...No matter what it is, I still try to talk to them and be friendly and take an interest in their life.” Jamie also thought it was important to be consistent in her job when she said:

It does not affect me. I know that, yeah, I may have to tell on someone but I have to tell on them for a reason. They obviously broke a rule and that is just what has to be done.

Jeff’s approach was similar in that he was not going to “cater to his residents.” Instead he was going to “still do my job. If they have a problem with that, they are just going to have to keep it to themselves.”

What The RAs Are Saying

With all four questions analyzed and the responses categorized, what is it that the RAs are saying? The RAs tended to see themselves and other RAs in a very positive light. Policy type descriptors were the least prevalent, and positive words like caring and compassionate were abundant. When it came to how RAs expressed authority, it was about a tie between “good” descriptors like respectful, nice and leading by example and “negative” words like strict, setting boundaries, and tone. RAs also primarily thought that residents viewed them very negatively. Positive perception descriptors were only 17% of total descriptors used. Even though RAs view themselves as positive figures, the perceived perception of residents has many RAs trying to compensate sometimes based on situations and sometimes based off of wanting to be liked.

Resident Assistant Description—Residents

Residents interviewed were asked the same first question RAs were. They were asked to provide three adjectives or descriptors that they thought described RAs. Seven categories emerged: leader, fun, helpful, responsible, caring, involved, and authority.

Leader

In this category, descriptors used were words like leader, leadership, confident, professional and ambitious. 31% of residents interviewed used a word belonging to this category.

Fun

In this category, descriptors used were communicator, fun, entertaining, crafty, outgoing, and excited. 41.4% of residents interviewed used a descriptor in this category, and often these descriptors were used along with the caring category descriptors. This category had the second greatest number of resident respondents.

Helpful

In this category, descriptors used were assistor, helpful, knowledgeable, informative, and intelligent. 34.5% of residents used a word belonging to this category when describing RAs.

Responsible

In this category, descriptors used were responsible, trustworthy, organized and dependable. This category also had 34.5% of residents using these descriptors to portray RAs.

Caring

In this category, descriptors used were relatable, sympathetic, positive, caring, nice, patient, compassionate and friendly. This category represented the greatest number of residents using these descriptors with 51.7%. This suggests that over half the residents interviewed felt that RAs were caring in some capacity.

Involved

In this category, descriptors used were dedicated, involved, present and community-based. This category did not represent as great a resident population as previous categories, but did account for 20.7% of residents interviewed.

Authority

In this final category, descriptors used were words like lawful, fair, and strict. This category represented the lowest number of interviewed residents at 13.8%. Every resident who used a descriptor in this theme also used a descriptor in a different theme to describe RAs.

How Resident Assistants Express Authority—Residents

The second question residents were asked in their interview was about how they think or have seen RAs express authority. Responses varied, but six main themes appeared: fair and calm, helper, body language, informed, nice and meetings. It should be noted that there were three residents out of the 29 interviewed that said they had never seen their RA express authority, and did not provide any further explanation of other RAs expressing authority.

Fair and Calm

Residents who answered the question using descriptors in this category had generally nice things to say about how their RA or RAs in general handle the

authority aspect of the job. Descriptors used here were words like fair, hears both sides, calm, responsible, levelheaded and quietly expresses. This theme accounted for 24.1% of residents interviewed. Eliza is a resident who has been in trouble before with her RA and she still had this to say:

My RA personally is a really good RA. I've even been in trouble, like I get noise complaints pretty often, and I feel like she always handles the situation calmly and fairly. I know that we are in the wrong whenever we are being loud so I am not like, "Oh quit getting on to us." I think she does a good job and I feel like most RAs in general probably are that way. I've encountered a few that are sassy, but that is just people in general. I wouldn't hold that trait to every RA.

Natalie also answered similarly when she said her RA expresses her authority, "Very calmly, quietly and nicely." Luke and Ellyn said that they think RAs express authority by listening to all sides of an issue before making a decision, and Ellyn went further by saying, "My RA...when she makes a decision, she sticks to it. She doesn't bend." All of these residents felt like the way their RA or RAs in general handle authority was fair, and did not have any qualms with the decisions made by RAs when they acted in this manner.

Helper

RAs are the employees who are around students more than any other staff member of a university. They are supposed to be there to guide residents and help them through their time at college. It is no surprise then that 24.1% of residents interviewed used a descriptor that belonged to this helper theme. Words used in this theme were personal, knowledgeable, present, helper, there for us, leads by example, and makes people feel comfortable. Liam described RAs as follows:

They weren't overly pushy. They made it so that you knew that you, by yourself, could approach them on a personal level but at the same time you still knew that they were the authority figure.

In a different hall, Kiley felt some of the same things when she said, "She (her RA) is always there if I have questions. I know I can always go to her if I, like, have a problem." Eli furthered that feeling when he said his RA expressed authority by, "making sure that everyone felt comfortable in the environment and that everyone felt invited to floor events." Residents who answered using descriptors in this theme had inclusive words and phrases that they used when describing RAs authority.

Body Language

This theme represented only two of the 29 residents interviewed (6.5%). The responses were from Natalie and Mark. Natalie said, "She gives you 'the look' so you have to listen to her." And Mark commented, "I think they express their authority by how they position themselves and their tone of voice. The interaction of their body language."

Informed

While this theme along with meetings use descriptors that are harsher than the other themes, residents who responded using these terms still had a generally positive outlook on RAs and authority. Words that were used in this theme were manages problems, gives discipline, informs and enforces rules, addresses issues, and friend second. This theme accounted for 55.2% of residents interviewed. This meant that over half of the residents interviewed used a descriptor belonging to this theme.

George said that he sees his RA expressing his authority, “when there is a behavior issue or someone is doing something wrong. He kind of manages it and gives some sort of discipline to the floor if they do something wrong.” Likewise, Eli said that his RA, “addressed issues on the floor and made sure things got done.” Others found their RAs to express authority by establishing that they are a RA first and a friend second. Ashley and Sam both spoke on that aspect of authority. Sam mentioned that his RA is, “a RA first and friend second” where Ashley elaborated a bit more saying:

She basically said in the beginning that she is not going to be our friend, she is going to be our authority figure. She doesn’t give out her number or instagram and stuff like that so you cannot really be on a friendship level with her. That is how she established authority with us.

Regardless of whether the expression of authority came from addressing issues or blatantly stating it, residents that used descriptors in this theme had seen RAs expressing authority in more classic, authoritative manners.

Nice

Residents who answered the question using descriptors from this theme had very positive things to say about RAs and authority. Some of the words included in this theme were not pushy, treat people nicely, caring, fun to be around, kind, and nice. This theme represented 24.1% of residents interviewed, which was tied for second with the fair and calm and helpful themes. Out of all the residents that used a descriptor in this theme, only one did not use a descriptor also belonging to the informed theme. Nick said:

They are really nice about how they treat people. It seems like they aren’t really too pushy with a lot of rules until you get really

belligerent and act out of control. Then it starts to become a problem and they have to use some power for certain things. But that's about it.

Similarly Vicky commented about her RA saying, "She's not overly authoritative. She still very nice about it but she is very clear about the rules and about what she wants from you."

Meetings

Meetings and duty rounds are events that all RAs at Ball State must do. These events are avenues where RAs definitely take on a leadership role and for 20.7% of residents interviewed, this theme represented one way in which they saw RAs express authority. Descriptors used in this theme were hall meetings, floor meetings and rounds. June particularly saw RAs in this light as her response covered all of the bases pertaining to this theme:

Whenever we have meetings she goes over the rules and makes sure that everyone knows what to do when we leave for breaks. She does rounds around the halls to make sure that everyone is safe and everything is going smoothly on the floor.

Similarly Marcus said that his RA "has held floor meetings to kind of lay down the rules at the beginning of the year and explain procedures for move out."

How You Want Authority Expressed—Residents

For this last question in the resident interviews, residents were asked, "If you were in the wrong and a RA had to express authority to you, how would you like them to do so?" The responses were analyzed and four main themes emerged: straightforward and one-on-one, respectful and calm, professional, and explanatory. Negative themes did not arise, as the majority of people do not wish to be yelled at

or berated when being corrected. Instead, 79.3% of residents interviewed used a descriptor that fell in to the respectful and calm theme.

Straightforward and One-On-One

Responses in this theme used descriptors like one-on-one, alone, personally, private, and straightforward. This theme was the second most prevalent with 45.2% of residents interviewed using one of these descriptors. Most residents who answered in this theme wanted to be addressed personally and not in public settings. June said, "I would want her (RA) to talk to me personally about the problem and not call me out in front of people. Just take me aside and deal with it instead of doing it in a public space or in front of other people." George even suggested going to one of their rooms to discuss the issue instead of in front of others. In that way, "it is just between us and we can work on fixing the problem." Some residents wanted RAs to be more straightforward first and then worry about privacy. Duke said he would want his RA to be upfront with him regardless of the amount of people around. Similarly LeBron said he would want his RA to be straightforward if he were in the wrong.

Respectful and Calm

This theme, as previously mentioned, housed the largest number of residents using these descriptors. Words that were categorized into this theme were non-threatening, friendly, understanding, calm, respectful, kind, and not rude. A common idea that was expressed by these residents was that if a RA was calm and respectful to them, then residents are more like to behave similarly. Nick said:

I would want them to approach it in a calm manner. That way I will stay calm too. If you come in screaming at me, chances are I am going

to come screaming back at you because I really like to be treated the way I think I should be in situations.

Similarly Eliza said:

They don't need to be trying to have power over you or be controlling. It's a lot better if they come to you on a personal level that makes sense. I think whenever somebody comes at you in a disrespectful manner, and they are trying to be head honcho, it makes students want to be shitty and rebel.

Not only does a disrespectful attitude make some residents want to respond poorly, it can make them feel uncomfortable as well. Haley, for example, said:

I really wouldn't want them to be pushy with it. There was a RA that wasn't mine that came to my room and told me I had something hanging up on my wall that I wasn't supposed to have hanging up. She was really rude about it, and kind of made me feel really uncomfortable. So making sure that they are respectful and letting me know I did something wrong but I am still okay.

Several residents also expressed the concern that they do not want to be talked down to by RAs when they are being authoritative. Kiley stated, "I would prefer her (RA) not to talk down to me. Talk to me like a person instead of like a lesson."

Marcus also expressed that he did not appreciate when RAs were condescending and Lily said, "Treat me like an adult, and not like a kid."

Professional

This theme shared ideas with the respectful and calm theme. There were 24.1% of residents interviewed who used descriptors belonging to this theme. Some of those descriptors were do their job, professional, document correctly and follow procedures. Danielle and Marcus both agreed that professionally is how they would like a situation to be handled, with Marcus commenting, "Just act like adults...sit down and let's talk about it and make sure we both understand what

needs to change in the future.” Lily stated that in addition to professionally, she wanted the situation to be handled correctly:

I prefer that they follow the rules and that they document it correctly. They should turn in all the paperwork, and I take responsibility for what I did. Hopefully it was taken care of correctly...I’d like them to be responsible, respectful...and act like they know what they are doing so I feel like they have authority.”

Eli agreed with Lily. He said:

I think the best thing that they can do is follow procedures. If I am in the wrong and broke a policy...I signed the contract that said that these are the rules and I’m going to follow them...this is what happens if I don’t. If they are following those rules then I agree with it.

Explanatory

This last theme was always paired with at least one other theme and never was the only response in a resident’s answer. This theme also represented the lowest number of resident responders with only 17.2% of residents using a descriptor in this theme. Descriptors used were explain how to fix it and explain consequences. Out of the five residents who used these descriptors, four of them used them along with the one-on-one and straightforward theme. Vicky said, “Sit me down in private and talk about it with me. Tell me what I did wrong and what I need to do to correct it.” Eve also had a similar response saying, “Stay calm and tell me what I did and how to fix it.” Mark took a slightly different approach and said he wanted to be informed not only of what he did wrong but also the consequences of those actions.

What The Residents Are Saying

Residents say that they see RAs in an overwhelmingly positive light. Only 3.4% of total responses were negative descriptors such as lawful or strict. It was found that most residents see RAs express authority by enforcing rules and addressing issues but also by personally helping and acting in a fair manner. Even when residents said RAs express authority by enforcing rules, many said they understood because their RA made the “RA first, friend second” statement early. Lastly, residents want to be treated primarily respectfully by RAs if they are in the wrong. Respect was expected by residents whether in a one-on-one interaction or in a group setting.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study as has shed light on a couple key concepts in regards to how residents and RAs interact at Ball State University. The first is that RAs and residents both view The resident assistant position similarly. When asked to describe a RA using adjectives or descriptors, both RAs and residents used primarily positive descriptors. Themes arose from both resident and RA responses and many involved similar descriptors. Involved and dedicated, social, role model, caring and authority were all prevalent themes. Even the other themes in both interview groups had comparable descriptors.

When RAs were asked what they thought residents’ perceptions of them were though, the responses were very negative. Positive perception descriptors were only 17% of total descriptors used. This is particularly troublesome since over 75% of RAs further went on to say that this supposed perception of them affects how they do their job. This means that RAs are being influenced by a false

perception that could then become their reality. If RAs knew that residents actually have very positive perceptions of them, then perhaps the way they go about performing their jobs would change. Some RAs said that they try to compensate and break a stereotype since they think residents do not like them or they do not want to be hated. What would happen, however, if they knew the real perception?

RAs that experience role strain because of the need to compensate or break the stereotype might have decreased stress if they hear the real perceptions. They would not have to struggle as much, continually hoping that residents like them because most residents' perceptions are already positive. Additionally, for those RAs that answered "no" to perceptions of residents affecting their job, they might change their authoritative stance. They might become less strict or have a more positive disposition towards residents, even residents who are in the wrong.

When it came to how authority was expressed, the way RAs described their methods was the same way that residents tended to observe. RAs said they used methods such as body language, setting boundaries and addressing issues. When asked, residents said they saw those methods in action. What RAs have been actively doing to express authority has not gone unnoticed to residents. However, residents chiefly want RAs to react calmly and respectfully when expressing authority, which was not the greatest response among RAs. Instead RAs said the top ways they express authority is by being strict or laidback. Though two separate spectrums, neither fully encompasses calm and respectful. In fact, the respectful theme for RAs only accounted for a moderate percentage of RAs interviewed.

If RAs knew exactly how residents wanted to be treated when in a policy violation situation, then RAs could better train and better cater to those needs. In doing so, RAs can potentially create better floor communities and better personal relationships with their residents. Even though some RAs already express authority in the ways that residents want, this knowledge is still important for them to hear. It is still necessary for RAs to understand that what many believe is the common perception of them is not necessarily the case. When RAs are able to go into a situation knowing that residents do not typically see them as inherently bad, it can make the situation they are dealing with much easier for everyone involved. It is easier to be nice to people when you do not think they hate you.

However, every situation is different. There are instances that RAs will come across where residents truly do not like RAs and the situations may be difficult and call for more stern authoritative measures. But as a whole, RAs should not assume that every situation needs strong authoritative action based off the resident responses in this study. Some RAs are naturally strict or nice authoritative figures, regardless of resident perceptions. Though these traits have their place and are integral parts of who these RAs are, RAs, like all people, can continually grow and reach outside their comfort zones. By becoming less strict for instance, formal authoritative figures might become more relatable to their residents and have an easier time making a personal connection. Conversely, for more lax authoritative RAs, demonstrating more formal authority, such as dealing directly with issues, they can gain more respect from residents and potentially have fewer issues on their floors.

The hope for this study is that Ball State Housing and Residence Life will use this information at Student Staff Orientation (SSO) and Mid-Year Student Staff Orientation (MYSSO) to better train RAs. This information should be presented to RAs, but beyond that, should be discussed amongst RAs because all of them (as heard through our interviews) have had different experiences with resident perceptions. In discussing these resident perceptions, RAs can learn from each other different authoritative strategies based on what residents see and want.

Hopefully this study will be a catalyst for changing how RAs interact authoritatively with residents, and also help RAs who are struggling with role strain to lessen their stress in this particular area. As for the benefits of this study for residents, they can learn how RAs see themselves and understand the struggle RAs have between being a friend and an authority figure. Understanding this may help residents better interact with RAs and potentially help make their job as a floor leader and authority easier by being on a more even playing field.

Limitations

There were a couple limitations to this study. The first was that a relatively small pool of residents was interviewed in comparison to the number of residents present on Ball State's campus. This was not the case for the RAs interviewed. A little over a third of the RAs on campus gave an interview whereas only 29 residents gave an interview. Another limitation was that Taylor Thurlow was an active RA. Though Emily Wimbec, a non-active RA, conducted the resident interviews there still could have been some discomfort from residents when responding to questions.

Also, for RAs interviewed, Taylor's active RA role could have influenced some of their responses depending on how they wanted to be perceived by him.

Future Research

With this study being rather narrow in scope in regards to residents interviewed, ideally another similar study would be conducted with a much larger resident interviewee base. More specific groups of people could be interviewed such as residents who have been documented for policy violations. Also, different types of residence halls should be examined to determine the differences, if any, between freshmen, upperclassmen, international, and honors communities and their resident interactions with RAs.

This study demonstrated that RAs do experience pressure from what residents think about them and how they, in turn, act. Similar to Powers study (2003) another, more current, study should be conducted examining this role strain in RAs, focusing specifically on the role strain they experience between being a friend and an authority. From this study a more complete look at RAs and their authoritative mentality can be examined and RAs can become even more informed to become the best RAs they can be.

Conclusion

The data and findings in this study may be limited in some respects, but they can be the start of conversations between RAs and residents as well as amongst Housing and Residence Life staff. The interview participants from both the RA and resident interview groups revealed that there are not as drastic differences between perceptions as some RAs would think. While solutions to correcting misperceived

perceptions raised in this study can be the start of improvements for RAs and resident interactions, there are still other areas that can be examined at Ball State University. Due to the great care Ball State Housing and Residence Life has for its residents and RAs, it is a logical place to initiate the conversations and continue future research to better serve those two populations.

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